

TWAIN COULD MARK THE BEAT

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In all the voluminous, detailed writing about Mark Twain there has been practically no attention paid to the engaging fact that he liked to dance. The one direct picture of him out on the floor is heart-warming and amusing but also misleading because it is given without rounded perspective by his official biographer, who quotes Twain's crony during his mining days in Nevada:

In changing partners, whenever he saw a hand raised he would grasp it with great pleasure and sail off into another set, oblivious to his surroundings. Sometimes he would act as though there was no use in trying to go right or to dance like other people, and with his eyes closed he would do a hoe-down or a double-shuffle all alone, talking to himself and saying that he never dreamed there was so much pleasure to be obtained at a ball. . . . By the second set all the ladies were falling over themselves to get him for a partner, and most of the crowd, too full of mirth to dance, were standing or sitting around, dying with laughter.¹

This picture focuses on Twain's clowning side rather than the ability that made him good enough to face the music in any kind of company long after most of his generation had quietly subsided into loafing around the punchbowl or just staying home. Though nobody knows when he first bowed to a partner, by 1858--when he was twenty-three years old--he did at least his share of the "moonlight dancing" on the "very spacious boiler deck" of the John J. Roe, a "delightful old" freighter on the Mississippi River. Even as late as 1908, when he was almost seventy-three and finally showing the signs of fatal wear and tear, he could explain his vigorous mood at a banquet by bragging that he had been "dancing last night at 12:30 o'clock."²

If Sammy Clemens took ballroom lessons in Hannibal, the record does not say so. The odds are clearly against it, even though his mother was supposedly famed for her "grace" and "able to dance all night" as a Kentucky belle. In the spring of 1860 Twain wrote to the family after taking her along on one of his trips as a steamboat pilot: "She was perfectly willing for me to dance until 12 o'clock at the imminent peril of my going to sleep on the

after-watch--but then she would top off with a very inconsistent sermon on dancing in general; ending with a terrific broadside aimed at that heresy of heresies, the Schottische."³ While this suggests that her willing feet had been hobbled by religious scruples and her austere husband, their grown son could not be kept on the sidelines by solemn frowns. With obvious gusto The Innocents Abroad described how a clique of the Quaker City pilgrims to the Holy Land organized shipboard dances--making a "ball-room display of brilliancy by hanging a number of ship's lanterns to the stanchions" before keeping time to an "asthmatic melodeon," an "unreliable" clarinet, and a "disreputable" accordion that "had a leak somewhere and breathed louder than it squawked."⁴ A worse handicap was the roll of the ship, which put too much "genuine reel" into the Virginia Reel and made all figures unmanageable.

There had also been other problems: to get up a set for a quadrille, men with "handkerchiefs around their arms to signify their sex" had to supplement the three women who were game. This did not bother Twain. In Nevada, when just one woman was on the floor for two or three hundred men, he had danced as a "lady"; as for having an audience, he would zestfully report that "six hundred admiring spectators" watched an intrepid few like himself stage a sea-going "ball" on the next trip he made after the Holy Land excursion. But the pious majority on the Quaker City voiced moral scruples, with its "poet lariat" (as Twain called him) warning:

To thus dance on the ocean waves

Seems like frolicking o'er our graves.⁵

In the letter Twain wrote for the New York Herald a few hours after the ship discharged its jaded party, he dropped the mask of joviality to sneer at the notion that they had taken a "pleasure" trip, charging among other grievances that "even this melancholy orgie" of dancing had been voted "sinful" after the third try and banned.

Obviously unrepentant, Twain would never be willing to concede that dancing is sinful nor be inclined to suspect that his personal troubles were a retribution for a ballroom "orgie." In 1893, when he was shuttling between Europe and his sinking business affairs in this country, he jotted in his notebook aboard the Kaiser Wilhelm II: "Nice ball on deck, with colored electric lights. I opened it with Captain Störmer--waltz, with overcoat[on?]. Danced the Virginia reel, with Longfellow for a partner."⁶ He was not particular about either his partner or the tune when the beat was strong enough. A few months afterward, on another worried trip, he wrote to his wife that when a "wonderful Hungarian band" at a flossy dinner party in Manhattan "burst out into an explosion of weird and tremendous dance music" and a "Hungarian celebrity and his wife took the floor," he was close behind: "I couldn't help it; the others drifted in one by one, and it was Onteora all over again."⁷ And when, back with his family in Paris a little later, he heard that the typesetter was definitely a failure and his shaky line of high finance had collapsed, he spent a bad day and sleepless night but the next evening "went to a masked

ball, taking Clara along," and "had a good time."⁸ Revealingly, he did not apologize that he had gone just for his daughter's sake.

In fact Twain enjoyed himself as much as anybody else at a masked ball, a soiree with Hungarian music (where, at the age of sixty, he "danced all those people down--and yet was not tired; merely breathless"), or more homespun affairs. Soon after the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise put him on a regular salary, he reported approvingly on a dance at which the ladies got up for every set with "exemplary industry."⁹ Holding that the "climate of Washoe appears unsuited" to "wall-flowers," he undoubtedly matched the ladies' industry, though he pretended to complain that "they sprung some more new figures on me last night." Just starting to shape his by-line personality, he was freely willing to play the bumbling innocent; a few weeks earlier, reporting on a "candy-pull" at the toniest hotel in Carson City, he even pretended to have done the waltz and polka "precisely" the same way--"you have only to spin around with frightful velocity and steer clear of the furniture."¹⁰ But his expert pleasure in the "amazingly exhilarating" waltz and polka as well as the "engaging and beautiful" quadrilles shone through his pose.

Both as a writer and a person, Twain is notorious for getting carried away. In a few more weeks he was apologizing publicly for wandering into the wrong set and then planting his "boots" on the trains of two ladies just as they started to move forward.¹¹ Not that his evening was totally spoiled, for he stayed until the "jolly" dancing ended at four o'clock in the morning, feeling that his set had managed the "very entertaining and elaborately scientific" Virginia Reel "rather better than the balance of the guests." This bit of brag was probably true, though he was sketching his public image with carefree strokes. The earliest extant piece carrying his pen name claimed that the smell of hot whiskey punch pulled him away in the very middle of a quadrille at a private party.¹² Still his dominating note was delight in parties at which the "dancing kept up with unabated fury until... the jolly company put on each other's hat and bonnets and wandered home." When he got carried away in more serious matters and was forced to slink out of Nevada, at least some of the dancing crowd must have been sorry.

As in other ways, Nevada's loss was San Francisco's gain. If Roughing It can be believed he took full advantage of a wider social field and "attended private parties in sumptuous evening dress, simpered and aired my graces like a born beau, and polked and schottisched with a step peculiar to myself and the kangaroo." He was, in sober truth, fully launched as a prowler of ballrooms. When he wandered on to Hawaii, his notebook for July 4, 1866, read: "Went to a ball 8:30 P. M. --danced until 12:30." After the Quaker City trip, when he tried out being a freelance columnist in Washington, D. C., he made it a point to cover the dances of the capital's upper crust and even took a whirl or two if there was an opening. When he was tramping around Germany in 1878 with the Reverend Joseph Twichell he gladly turned out for a "fine" society ball at Baden-Baden. When he visited a daughter who was a



DANCING UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

ABOVE: "Dancing Under Difficulties," from page 42 of the first edition of The Innocents Abroad (1869).

freshman at Bryn Mawr he insisted on joining in "two Virginia reels" and "another dance"--after he had traveled eight hours and then walked to the campus from the train station.¹³ By then, it should be noted, he had long ago stopped making defensive fun of his ability to keep on the beat or off his partner's toes.

In fact his confidence along this line had long ago become almost fool-hardy. When the Quaker City pilgrims stopped at Yalta in 1867 and found themselves treated to an elaborate welcome as a maneuver in Russian diplomacy, he had recklessly plunged into an "astonishing sort of dance an hour long, and one that I had never heard of before"; inspired by an especially good-looking partner in a "very lively and complicated set" of twenty, he even "carelessly threw in a figure every now and then that made those Russians ashamed of themselves."¹⁴ No doubt he had been the life of the party again, and instead of having painful second-thoughts, he sighed over his Russian partner as the "most beautiful girl that ever lived"--though this was changed to a "very pretty girl" after he met Olivia Langdon, who went over the proofs of The Innocents Abroad with him. Prone to doubts about himself at practically every point, he nevertheless felt adequate to try or judge any step done to music. During his stay in Hawaii he made sure to see the "famous hulahula"

and, while taking notice of more exotic details, was expertly appreciative of how thirty "buxom" natives kept the "exactest uniformity of movement and accuracy of 'time'".¹⁵

If the hula hula were not done only by women he would surely have tried that too. Perhaps the most unusual steps he actually took--including the "astonisher" at Yalta--came in 1894 at a studio party in New York City when the completely stag group danced for an hour to "ravishing" music.¹⁶ That it was an eminently respectable party is proved both by the list of guests and the fact that he told his wife about it. Anyway he needed to make no excuses about dancing itself, for she had once written to him, ". . . I believe dancing and singing is a true way to give praise to God--our whole natures seem to enter in them."¹⁷ There is no record that he ever showed off his waltz, polka, schottische or fancier steps with her, but it looks likely. There is no record either that ballroom affairs were popular with the sedate Nook Farm circle in Hartford, but if they were, he must have come early and stayed late, in the middle of the floor and on the beat, at his relaxed and unconcerned best.

Twain would have been surprised, I think, that his dancing should intrigue us. Always both willing and able, from his earliest manhood to his silver-maned fame and from the simplest rhythmic shuffle to intricate patterns, he found a deep release in dancing that comes only to the enthusiast, and never felt the need to justify it. Nor did he feel that he was a string-tied westerner taking sides with the folk spirit or country-fiddler Americana. His response was both broader and much more inward. When Satan plunged the Austrian boys into tears by killing the five hundred tiny people they were playing with in The Mysterious Stranger, he was able to get them happily "dancing on that grave" very soon: he was helped by music of unearthly beauty that he played on a "strange, sweet instrument," but he "brought the dance from Heaven, too, and the bliss of paradise was in it." Though most of us cannot completely believe in the scene, Twain did--literally, from his head to his toes.

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Footnotes:

¹ A. B. Paine, Mark Twain: A Biography (New York, 1912), 195.

² Charles Neider, ed., The Autobiography of Mark Twain (New York, 1959), 79; A. B. Paine, ed., Mark Twain's Speeches (New York, 1923), 383. For his dancing in 1906 see Lewis Leary, ed., Mark Twain's Letters to Mary (New York, 1961), 81.

³ A. B. Paine, ed., Mark Twain's Letters (New York, 1917), I, 47.

⁴ Ibid., I, chaps. 4 and 10; II, Appendix.

⁵ Franklin R. Rogers, Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns (Dallas, 1960), 168; A. B. Paine, ed., Mark Twain's Autobiography (New York,

1924), II, 326-27; Cyril Clemens, ed., Republican Letters (Webster Groves, Mo., 1941), 11.

⁶ With minor changes this passage is printed in A. B. Paine, ed., Mark Twain's Notebook (New York, 1935), 229. His partner may have been Ernest Longfellow, son of the poet.

⁷ Mark Twain's Letters, II, 605. Onteora was a summer resort in the Catskills that the Clemenses liked in the early 1890's.

⁸ Mark Twain: A Biography, 993.

⁹ Quoted in Effie Mona Mack, Mark Twain in Nevada (New York, 1947), 226.

¹⁰ Henry Nash Smith, ed., Mark Twain of the "Enterprise" (Berkeley, Calif., 1957), 39-40.

¹¹ Ibid., 45-47.

¹² Ibid., 51, 56, 58-59.

¹³ Dixon Wecter, ed., The Love Letters of Mark Twain (New York, 1949), 258-59.

¹⁴ Daniel M. McKeithan, ed., Traveling with the Innocents Abroad (New York, 1958), 166-67.

¹⁵ Walter F. Frear, Mark Twain and Hawaii (New York, 1947), 351; Roughing It, II, chap. 25.

¹⁶ Mark Twain's Letters, II, 610.

¹⁷ The Love Letters of Mark Twain, 120.